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"There's No Guidebook for This":

Black Freelancers and Digital Technologies

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“There’s no Guidebook for This”:

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by

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Abstract

“There’s no Guidebook for This”:

Black Freelancers and Digital Technologies

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Freelancing has become increasingly common in a variety of industries due to the continued economic restructuring of post-industrial capitalism. While writing has traditionally been a precarious profession characterized by low pay and intermittent work, once secure forms of employment, such as newspaper work, have experienced a precipitous decline within the past few decades. As the number of writers engaged in standard employment contracts has sharply decreased, an increasing number of individuals must engage in freelance work to earn a living as writers. While all freelance writers face precarity at the hands of digital media outlets due to exploitative and unstable labor and business practices, black freelancers experience distinct forms of precarity, such as a lack of access to professional networks and mentors. This report aims to identify the ways in which digital technologies allow black freelancers to insulate themselves from the risks inherent to the digital media ecosystem, ending with recommendations for education systems, digital media organizations and freelancers seeking to promote equity in digital publishing.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

In June 2017, Viacom laid off the majority of its *MTV News* writing staff, which marked the end of the outlet's experiment with long-form journalism that engaged with both social issues and music news. The driving factors behind the site's revamp, as reported in *Spin* and *Billboard,* were the unionization of its writers' room as well as the staff's unwillingness to produce "safe and inoffensive content" (Sargent, 2017). These claims were denied by corporate leaders, who rationalized the shuttering as a result of a larger "pivot to video" (.ibid). In July 2018, Mat Breen, *MTV News'* interim leader, took to Twitter to issue a call for

> contributors on social justice and issue-oriented news topics: #BLM, #LGBTQ, #meToo, #resist, #DACA, #midterms, #environment, #WomensRights, #GunControlNow, #politics, youth mental and sexual health, breaking news, and more…

This invitation was met with criticism from both former *MTV News* contributors and outside observers, who argued that this call for contributors was done to attract young, exposure hungry writers who would produce work for little money without the promise of future employment. "Wait I'm sorry. You mean to tell me you all are now hiring ppl to write about the topics that the writers you just fired last year wrote about ??? quipped Twitter user and freelance writer @daniecal. In a reference to *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air,* @Anxiety_Jane wrote "Writer buddies! @MTVNews is putting out a call for collective amnesia on how we unceremoniously ditched & dismisses [sic] the original Aunt Vi and are now trying to hire a replacement Aunt Vi in the hopes no one will notice. #BlackWriterScraps." Breen's call for writers was eventually deleted from Twitter, likely due to the volume and biting nature of criticism levied against the publication. This

anecdote indicates that while they may not be in a position to bargain for better working conditions and pay, freelance writers can utilize digital tools and communities to criticize, and perhaps prevent publications from conducting deceitful and predatory business practices.

The story of *MTV News* is quite common. The digital media ecosystem of the past few years have been marked by a near predictable cycle of outlet formation, worker exploitation or dissatisfaction and attempts at unionization, often followed by mass layoffs or shutterings, sometimes ending with a gutted relaunch of the original site. This cycle has affected outlets such as *DNAInfo, Mic, Into,* and several others. The most dramatic instantiation of this cycle occurred in January 2019, where a round of layoffs impacting *BuzzFeed*, *Vice,* Verizon Media, and Gannett led to the loss of over 2,100 jobs (Goggin, 2019). While the only certainty in digital media seems to be dissatisfaction for readers and writers, digital platforms and communities such as Twitter provide a space for interested parties to commune around those affected by this instability, offering them work opportunities, emotional support, and solidarity.

"Every couple months there are mass layoffs in media, and yet some media companies still expect exclusivity from their staff, which...nah… I just can't understand your job asking you to put yourself in a financially precarious situation while not offering any real financial security. A job is not a favor. It's a contract. They're not doing something FOR you by giving you the paycheck you earned…Nobody gets into media to be rich, but I definitely don't work just to be broke. And I like working. But you can't own me. I keep multiple streams of income, and I will for as long as my interests & energy allow me to do so. Total exclusivity is a trap." Ashley C. Ford (@iSmashFizzle) via Twitter, Jan 16, 2019

"Black freelance writers deserve everything. The dedication it takes to put those words down and send it into the world while dealing with janky publications stealing pitches,

late pay and wack editors is so admirable." - Twitter user @QGotNoRings, Feburary 5, 2019

While the unpredictability of the digital-media ecosystem leads many writers to experience outsized risk and precarity, black writers are particularly vulnerable, as those with degrees in journalism are less likely to be hired upon graduation and are the first to lose their jobs in layoffs (Barthel, 2015; Kalev, 2016). Black writers who do manage to find employment in the journalism industry are often limited to writing content focused upon African-American culture, which is often edited to titillate white audiences, which may lead to frustration and early exit from the industry (Newkirk, 2000). Many writers have turned to freelancing in an effort to gain some control over their working lives, which provides benefits in terms of flexibility but offers very little in terms of stability and worker protection. While organizations such as New York City-based trade association The Freelancers Union have made some strides in improving the conditions of freelance writers via local legislation, these efforts are often geographically clustered (Freelancers Union, 2019). In comparison, digital platforms and communities can be accessed by anyone with an internet connection and are free to use, allowing freelancers to connect with one another, share employment opportunities, and build audiences.

What follows is an examination of the online networks and digital platforms that seek to insulate black freelance writers from the precarity of working for digital publications. After reviewing the extant literature on black writers' experience in the publishing industry, the digital media ecosystem's impact upon the nature of labor, and the ways in which black internet users use online platforms to organize and connect, I

will move on to a case study of Writers of Color, a Twitter account that seeks to connect black writers and freelancers with job opportunities, gauging the sites' effectiveness and utility for black freelance writers. I will close by recounting interview responses with three separate black freelancers active in Twitter, discussing how their use of the platform allows them to identify professional contacts, gather inside information on the publishing industry, and obtain job opportunities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Post- Fordism and the Rise of Flexible Work

Freelancing has become increasingly common in a variety of industries due to the continued economic restructuring of post-industrial capitalism. Fordism, the dominant economic model of United States capitalism from the early 1900s to early 1970s, was characterized by a standardized work day and payment structure, which provided workers with the "sufficient income and leisure time to consume the mass-produced products...corporations were about to turn out in ever vaster quantities" (Harvey, 1989; pg. 126). Post-Fordism emerged in the 1970s, as the "stagnation of goods and high inflation of prices" led to a dramatic restructuring of economic, social and political life (ibid; pg. 145). Post-Fordism is characterized by what Harvey refers to as flexible accumulation, which "rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption" (ibid; pg. 147). The weakening power of labor unions and the rise of mass unemployment allows employers to push for "much more flexible work regimes and labour practices," including "a lack of legal protections or benefits" (Harvey, 1989; pg 150, Scholz, 2017; pg.11).

The increasing ubiquity of new information technologies increased the viability and availability of forms of digital work, which are likewise characterized by flexibility and lack of worker protection. Statistics regarding the total number of freelance workers active in the United States economy vary. The National Bureau of Labor statistics released a 2017 report indicating that 1.3 to 1.8 percent of the country's workforce engages in freelance work, a figure that some criticized as inaccurate due to its use of a

"one-week snapshot of work activity, which may not accurately reflect the working schedules of freelancers today," who often experience large gaps between work opportunities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; Cox, 2018). In 2017, the Freelancers Union, a trade association that serves freelancers operating in North America, released its annual "Freelancing in America" report, which estimated that 57.3 million Americans, or over a third of the U.S. workforce, are currently engaged in freelance work (Upwork, 2017). This statistic closely aligns with a study released in 2016 by the McKinsey Institute, which asserted that "20-30 percent of the working-age population…engage in some form of independent work" (Manyika, et al., 2016). Writers are particularly likely to engage in freelancing; according to the National Bureau of Labor statistics, 64% of the nations' estimated 131,200 writers are self-employed, a figure that is likely growing due to the continued instability of the journalism industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

Flexible Work in the Publishing Industry

While writing has traditionally been a precarious profession characterized by low pay and intermittent employment, once secure forms of employment, such as newspaper work, have experienced a precipitous decline within the past few decades. Newspaper employment experienced a 60% decline from 1990 to 2016, with the total number of individuals working in the industry falling from 458,000 to 183,000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). While the digital publishing industry grew in size during this time period, growth did not keep pace with the loss of newspaper jobs, as 197,800 individuals were employed by digital publishers in March 2016. Published by the National Bureau of

Labor Statistics, the working definition of employment in these figures refers "to persons on establishment payrolls" and does not include the "unincorporated self-employed" or freelancers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). As the number of writers engaged in standard employment contracts has sharply decreased, an increasing number of individuals must engage in freelance work to earn a living as writers.

Black Writers, Discrimination and the Publishing Industry

While these shifts in the United States' economy have constricted traditional employment opportunities for all writers, black writers are particularly vulnerable, as they have been historically maligned in the journalism industry. In 1978, African-Americans comprised 10% of the US population but held just 2% of the nation's 43,000 newsroom jobs (Newkirk, 2000). In an effort to address this disparity, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) pledged to "[have] newsroom staffs reflect the proportion of minorities in the population by the year 2000" (Newkirk, 2000; pg. 36). In 2018, racial minorities comprised nearly 40% of the US population, but just 23% of newsroom staff (US Census, 2018; Greico, 2018). ASNE abandoned its pledge in 1998; the inability to fulfill its 1978 goal continues to have an impact on the experience of those working at media publications as well as the nature of media produced. Non-whites looking to enter the publishing business continue to face significant barriers to entry: those who receive undergraduate degrees in journalism, communication and broadcasting are 17% less likely "to find a full-time position within a year of graduating," than their white counterparts, while those who are able to find full-time positions are the first to be affected by layoffs, as they are often structured by "position and tenure" (Barthel, 2015;

Kalev, 2016). While non-white writers' struggle for employment, autonomy, and stability in traditional newsrooms is well documented, the rise of digital technologies and their impact upon the publishing industry may have intensified the risks they face given an increasingly unstable market.

Dissolving Revenue: Print Publications in the Digital Age

Print publications have traditionally relied upon ad revenue and classified ad sales to generate profit; the creation of free, online classified services such as Craigslist along with tech giants Facebook and Google's near monopoly over the online advertising space has eaten into this important source of revenue. These two companies currently control 58% of the $111 billion digital ad market, with Amazon comprising an additional 4.2% (Soper, 2018). In addition to this loss of classified and advertising revenue, the increasing migration of consumers to the digital space has also impacted subscription rates, as those with internet access can often read and share published content free of charge (McChesney, 2013; pg. 172). Paywalls provide a means for publications to halt free consumer access to news; this tactic may diminish outlets' reach and cultural relevance, a tradeoff many publications are unwilling to make (Stulberg, 2017).

New Media, Same (Revenue) Struggles

The large-scale migration of news consumers and readers to the digital space has facilitated the rise of online-only media outlets that produce the news, culture, and opinion pieces featured by traditional print publications. While these smaller, digital-only publications often have wide readerships, many experience the same struggles as their traditional print counterparts in terms of revenue generation, profitability, and workplace

diversity. Although there has been a marked increase in digital-native media outlets, this growth has not kept pace with the dissolution of the traditional journalism industry. Between 2005 and 2016, approximately 25,000 print journalists lost their jobs due to budget cuts and layoffs; digital-only publications hired only 7,000 journalists within the same time period (Williams, 2016). Emerging digital media outlets have tended to be clustered in coastal cities such as Washington, D.C., New York City, and Los Angeles, providing a steep barrier of entry for those who cannot afford the often-high cost of living. (.ibid) This geographic concentration has had an impact on both the volume and quality of news coverage focused on and produced by those living in smaller locales (.ibid). Digital media startups experience the same difficulties in recruiting and retaining racially diverse job candidates as their traditional print counterparts, so much so that the National Association of Black Journalists penned an open letter in 2014 calling for digital media outlets Vox Media, The Marshall Project, First Look Media, and FiveThirtyEight to address the gender and racial disparities in their hiring practices, which was heavily tilted towards white males (NABJ, 2014).

Many digital media outlets rely upon venture capitalist funding to stay afloat. These investors tend to apply the market logics of technology startups to digital media; attempting to scale quickly in the aims of controlling an outsized market share and generating profit (Marshall, 2017). The outsized number of digital media startups employing this strategy has led to an oversaturation of the market and heavy competition, leading many publications to take outsized risks in the aims of producing returns (Ingram, 2018). The increasingly high volume of data available to those working in the digital

space has led to a reliance on user metrics to communicate growth, influence, and impact to potential investors. Many digital media startups tend to focus on metrics such as unique users or clicks, which, although being a problematic method in which to define influence and audience, continues to define the investment logics of many digital publications (Bell and Owen, 2017). Investigations into online newsreaders indicates that the majority of those who click on news links cannot recollect the specific source from which they received information, signaling that clicks are an unreliable metric by which to measure influence and impact (.ibid). Because more unique visitors equals more potential ad readers, many digital newsrooms focus upon producing articles that get as many clicks as possible; the office of since-shuttered web publication *Gawker* was known for its large TV screens that broadcast how many clicks each writer's post received, sending a clear message to writers that producing viral content was their goal (Ingraham, 2019).

Digital Media Outlets and the Exploitation of Identities

This obsession with metrics and virality has the potential to structure and limit the types of content publication editors will acquire, leading many digital news rooms to exploit both social and political issues for page views. When digital media outlet *Mic* experienced success with its coverage of social justice issues, it launched an 'Identities' section "dedicated to examining the intersections of sexuality, gender, class and race in politics and culture for the millennial generation" (Jefferies, 2017). What was in theory a laudable goal of connecting with politically active youth was in fact an attempt to harness young people's investment in progressive politics to generate clicks, page views, and

readers. *Mic's* management alienated the diverse workforce it had cultivated via tone deaf memos, meetings, and story pitches, wherein they asked writers to exploit their identities and politics for clicks. As one former staffer remarked: "We were run by people who did not believe the things that their staffers were hired to write about and their staffers truly believed in" (.ibid). This disconnect between staff and management recalls investigations of black writers working in 1990s newsrooms, which revealed that the racial demographics of management and newsroom staff impacted both the stories produced and who was assigned to cover them (Newkirk, 2000). While black writers were often assigned stories focused upon African-American cultural and political life, they were encouraged to limit this coverage to those topics that most appealed to white audiences (.ibid). Rather than giving black writers a great degree of autonomy and control over their assignments, editors had been known to emphasize aspects of their work that most titillated white readers, often at the expense of nuance and clarity (.ibid). Black writers' experiences at publications such as *Mic* indicate that little has changed except for demonstrable metrics that provide a rationale for these practices.

Metrics and Digital Media Outlets

In addition to producing sensationalistic and exploitative content, many digital media outlets attempt to harness the opaque and ever-shifting metrics of social media sites in the aims of gaining clicks and readers. Facebook has been of particular focus to these outlets given its large user base. The platform's 'news feed' algorithm and its incentivization of video content in 2015 led many online outlets to 'pivot to video' in an attempt to gain viewers, which in turn led them to disinvest from their traditional

journalism departments; laying off a number of their writers (Madrigal & Meyer, 2018). This investment in video yielded low returns, both due to Facebook's faulty viewer metrics, as well as its later reconstitution of the platform's news feed algorithm, which led to fewer referrals to digital media sites (.ibid). Outlets responded to this lack of investment return by shuttering its newly minted video departments, leading to more layoffs and an overall unstable ecosystem, as the new skills journalists developed were suddenly no longer useful (.ibid).

Labor and Digital Media Outlets

In addition to risky revenue generating strategies, media companies operating in the digital space engage in various cost cutting measures in an attempt to create and retain profit. Often times these cost-cutting strategies have a negative impact on labor conditions. Many digital media workers have turned to union formation and membership in an attempt to address the instabilities inherent to digital media work. Union contracts allow members affected by layoffs to receive health benefits and severance pay, which many workers may view as a necessity considering the precarity of the digital media landscape (Weiss, 2017). By campaigning for better pay, editorial independence, and diversity in hiring and retention practices, unions seem well equipped to address the inequities and labor issues faced by digital media workers. While union membership provides an avenue to better work conditions and ethical business practices, a number of digital media outlets have been shuttered after successful unionization efforts, including *Mic*, *DNAinfo, and MTV News,* indicating that despite their benefits for workers, union formation involves a large element of risk for writers (Vernon 2017; Goggin, 2018).

The Precarity of Freelance Writing

While unions provide staff workers with protections, freelance writers have traditionally been unable to take part in unionization efforts due to their contractor status. Freelancers represent a sizeable and precarious labor pool that needs protection. There are close to 83,968 active freelance writers working in the United States; unions such as the Writers' Guild of America are seeking to include freelancers in their organization efforts, but the effectiveness of these efforts remain to be seen (Mlotek, 2019). As of March 2019, publications such as Conde Nast's *Epicurious* are beginning to offer full-time freelance positions, which require all of the work of full-time employment but none of the worker protections (Tamarkan, 2019). The increasing ubiquity of flexible work, in addition to the continuance of exploitative labor practices, indicates that freelance writers are in dire need of protections.

Other contingent workers, such as rideshare drivers and crowd-workers, have also sought to obtain protections from the precarity of flexible work. Lawsuits currently seem to be the best option for contingent workers seeking protections; if a judge rules that a company is in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act, they are legally obligated to alter their business practices (Scholz, 2017; pg. 138). Many companies elect to settle such lawsuits out of court, as it prevents judges from ruling in the favor of workers, allowing corporations to continue their often-exploitative business practices (.ibid). While New York state has produced legislature that protects freelance writers from excessively late payment, this policy is limited by geography and does not protect freelancers operating outside of New York (Freelancers Union, 2019).

While freelance writers have had to chase late payments from publishers long before the internet's ubiquity, third-party payment services such as WorkMarket have exacerbated the labor tensions and risks experienced by freelance writers (O'Neil, 2018). Payment portal WorkMarket serves as an intermediary between media outlets and freelance laborers; in 2018 they unveiled a 'fast-funds' service that allowed freelancers to obtain immediate payment for their work at the cost of a 7-8% service charge, effectively operating as a payday loan service (.ibid). While this service fee may have provided convenience for freelancers attempting to receive payments more quickly, it preys upon the cash-strapped freelancer truly desperate for cash. Online backlash to WorkMarket's 'fast-funds' feature led outlets using the service such as The Huffington Post declare its discontinuation, only for the service to reappear a few months later, this time with a slightly less exploitative fee of 2% (.ibid).

A number of online services have emerged in the past decade that allow freelance writers to insulate themselves from the precarity of working for digital publications. The website Who Pays Writers? allows freelancers to identify both the pay scale and payment process of various publications, which enables them to construct targeted pitches in an effort to avoid frustration and exploitation through targeted pitches (Who Pays Writers?, 2019). In addition to third party services, a number of writers have pursued self-publishing in an effort to gain autonomy over their work and pay. Services such as Patreon allow freelancers to obtain payment directly from readers; other writers include links to their personal payment systems, such as Cashapp and Venmo, in their online profiles (Patreon, 2019; Clayton, 2019). While these strategies allow writers to receive

direct payment from their readers, these services most benefit writers with established audiences, limiting their effectiveness for emerging or developing freelancers.

Black Freelancers

While all freelance writers face precarity at the hands of digital media outlets due to the labor and business practices discussed above, "the personal contacts and informal networks" that facilitate connections to freelancing opportunities provide additional barriers to entry for black writers, who often operate outside of these networks (Cohen, 2016, pg 241). As mentioned earlier, those occupying positions of power in media organizations are often white males who tend to hire and contract individuals who "occupy a shared social location," effectively shutting out those outside of these networks, many of whom tend to be women and people of color (.ibid). Extant literature on job searching and social mobility indicates that "whites hoard opportunities in a way that gives them unearned advantages and helps protect them from competition in the labor market," disadvantaging black freelancers who may not have the same connections as their white counterparts (DiTomaso, 2013; pg. 316). Rivera's investigation into elite job firms found that "the ascriptive characteristics used to delineate the potential pool of new hires….are highly correlated with socioeconomic status and race" (Rivera, 2015; pg. 35). This "limits competition by gender and race," which often prevents black job applicants from attaining employment (.ibid, pg. 44).

The absence of visible role models who can mentor and encourage their developing counterparts presents an additional disadvantage and barrier to entry for black freelancers, as neophytes may not have the funds of knowledge to navigate issues of pay

negotiation and exploitation (Seldon, 2017). In addition, non-white freelancers are more frequently asked for discounted rates and report that they feel as though their work is more "harshly inspected than their peers," which makes the work of freelancing more arduous (Nickolaisen, 2016).

Online Networks and Black Freelancers

While there are both ideological and legal barriers that prevent freelance laborers from organizing, online networks provide opportunities for freelance laborers workers to commune and connect with one another, facilitating job connections and sharing strategies on navigating the freelance world. The micro-blogging site Twitter may provide a particularly useful destination for black writers, due to the platform's large number of black users (Smith, 2011).

While the outsized number of black users on the social networking site Twitter is often characterized as a new or novel phenomenon, the internet has long provided destinations for black users since its popularization in the late 1990s. Sites such as BlackVoices and NetNoir, while not news outlets, provided a space for internet users seeking information and entertainment aimed at black audiences. Critics were doubtful that these sites could "[provide] the kind of news and information so lacking in the mainstream press," arguing that a "public service incentive" was required in order to provide alternatives to mainstream news narratives (Newkirk, 2000; pg. 216). While Twitter lacks the public service mission of a traditional news outlet, black users have been able to utilize the social networking site as a counterpublic, employing text, image and video in efforts to oppose and negate instances of anti-black news and media. Their

ability to provide a counternarrative to mainstream news stories may be one reason black news consumers are more likely to access news stories via social working sites, as user commentary can add contextualization lacking in mainstream news stories (Bialik and Matsa, 2017).

While Twitter allows black users to provide counternarratives to mainstream media messages, the sites' platform affordances also allow users to produce innovative and influential forms of cultural production and commentary, which often become news and content fodder for both print and digital media outlets. Black Twitter users' discussion of Olympic gymnast Gabby Douglas' hair sparked a week-long news cycle, while memes and hashtags circulated by black Twitter users are often screenshot and recycled into 'stories' by digital media outlets such as BuzzFeed (McElroy, 2016; Osifo, 2018). Many critics have argued that this latter practice is a form of exploitation and theft, as these digital media outlets profit off of the audience and clicks they get without rightly crediting or compensating the creator (Ibrahim, 2019).

Extant literature on internet 'micro-celebrity,' in which individuals utilize online platforms to create and sustain large niche audiences with whom they reciprocate interaction, indicates that internet users can utilize social networks to build personal brands and generate profit (Senft, 2008; Abidin, 2017). The majority of these investigations have focused upon individuals operating within the genres of beauty, fashion and parenting, most likely due to these genres' close relationship to consumer culture, which allow micro-celebrities to partner with brands and generate profit. While it may be unrealistic to expect that black writers can use Twitter to create the same massive

profits as a YouTube beauty vlogger, the platform's affordances allow for individual users to build audiences and networks, which may provide the opportunity for otherwise unknown writers to break into the industry. By examining the social networks formed by and around black writers, I aim to identify the ways in which these digital communities insulate their members from the precarity of the digital media ecosystem.

Chapter 3: How Do Twitter Networks Impact the Pitch Process?

"Formal mechanisms such as job postings or mediating organizations that help freelancers secure work are uncommon, and so informal connections, personal contacts, and social networks are crucial….the work of obtaining work is less onerous for those with industry contacts….the ad hoc distribution of work relies heavily on individuals' cultural capital and ability to network and make key connections" (Cohen, 2016; pg. 125).

"I want to thank @WritersofColor for tweeting this. Bc as of next week, I got this job!! Twitter is real. It changes lives. #PTL "- @ConStar24

"I have no real advice for writers but I will say that almost every outlet/editor that does that mass call for pitches is bullshit. They know that marginalized ppl who wouldn't otherwise have access to them are eager, likely to respond. Then the lowball begins :)" - Jasmine Sanders (@JasMoneyRecords) July 10, 2018

In order to secure work at digital publications, freelance writers must go through a 'pitch process,' which involves identifying potential outlets amenable to ones' work and writing what can range from "a short email to completing detailed research and interviews," the final product of which is then sent to an editor (Cohen, 2016; pg. 125). For example, if a freelancer wished to pitch an article focused upon the evolution of a particular musician, they would identify music publications interested in such a story, find the contact information of a relevant editor, and email a compelling outline of their story idea, as well as examples of past work. Having connections to those with positions of power in the publishing industry makes the unpaid work of pitching less arduous, as is it is more likely that ones' work will be selected for publication (.ibid). The importance of personal contacts has the potential to impede black writers' entry into the publishing world, as those in management positions at digital outlets continue to consist largely of

white males, who may not share the same social location or networks as black writers (.ibid).

The Pitch Process: Origins and Potential for Exploitation

While there is a dearth of literature explicitly examining the history of the pitch process, historical accounts of commercial publishing's emergence indicate that the modern pitch process emerged in the mid 20th century, when, in an effort to lower their overhead costs, magazines began to rely upon freelancers to produce written content (Cohen, 2017; pg. 65). This required writers to send in short proposals of story ideas, which were either acquired or rejected by publication editors. The dissolution of the traditional publishing industry in the early 2000s likely intensified the need for freelance writers, as the widespread layoffs of staff writers necessitated a low-cost alternative (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

The often-intensive nature of the pitch process allows for exploitation of freelance journalists, as outlets may require writers to produce extensive research and outlines of their pitches without the guarantee of publication. While many publications offer a 'kill fee' for writers who have written comprehensive outlines or full articles that do not reach publication, writers have described experiences where they have been required to write extensive pitches without the guarantee of payment (Ziyad and Newton, 2017; Crumpton, 2019). Freelance writer Taylor Crumpton has claimed that this practice allows editors to gather information and story ideas that they can then pass on to their staff writers without paying or attributing freelancers, indicating that the pitch process potentially enables exploitation (Crumpton, 2019).

Writers of Color and Attempts to Democratize the Pitch Process

In an effort to address the inequities involved in the pitch and publication process, a number of online networks have formed to connect non-white writers with paid writing opportunities and job postings. Founded in 2015, the website Writers of Color maintains an online database of non-white writers, their locations, and their topics of focus. The website aims to "create more visibility for writers of color, ease their access to publications, and build a platform that is both easy for editors to use and accurately represents the writers" (Writers of Color, 2019). The Writers of Color website is volunteer run and provides its source code to any who are interested in pursuing a similar project in a different industry. The site maintains an associated Twitter account (@WritersofColor), which retweets writing gigs and job opportunities, sometimes providing additional information and editorialization that may be absent from the initial tweet. Many editors send postings directly to the Writers of Color account, ostensibly in the efforts of connecting with writers who may not have the same industry connections as their white counterparts.

While the Writers of Color account facilitates connections between writers and publications or editors, some commentators are critical of pitch calls that are explicitly aimed at non-white writers, arguing that they aim to exploit those that may have less familiarity with the publishing industry as well as those that are hungry for exposure (Sanders, 2018). Others claim that outlets who direct pitches to the Writers of Color Twitter account do so in the efforts of making their publications appear racially diverse without making substantial investments in their hiring practices (Ramanan, 2019). While

some Twitter users have personally testified to the impact of Writers of Color, it is unclear to what extent such networks democratize the pitch process (Gibbs, 2016).

While retweeting publicly listed job opportunities may benefit job seeking black freelancers, extant literature on job searching indicates that inside "information (someone telling you of a job opening that may not be publicly known to others yet, or about how to apply or what to expect in getting a job), influence (someone putting in a good word for you that may sway the decision- makers in your favor), or direct opportunity (knowing the person who makes the hiring decision, who then acts in your favor)" are some of the most important and effective tools used by individuals seeking employment (DiTomaso, 2013; pg. 68). The personal nature of these forms of support indicates that they are beyond the purview of Twitter accounts such as Writers of Color, potentially limiting the sites' effectiveness.

In an effort to identify the ways in which online networks such as Writers of Color facilitate the pitch and publication process for black freelance writers, I utilized gaming website *IGN*'s black history month series as a case study, the announcement for which was posted on Twitter and tagged the Writers of Color account. By analyzing Twitter users' response to this pitch call, as well as the networks and publication histories of the selected authors, I sought to determine the ways in which online networks facilitated both the pitch and publication process. Findings indicated that personal connections facilitated the publication of at least two of five selected pieces, demonstrating the continued importance of personal contacts in obtaining publication credits. All five authors whose work was selected had extensive publication histories,

indicating that the services provided by Writers of Color may be more beneficial to established rather than developing writers.

About *IGN*

Founded in September 1996 as the "Imagine Games Network," IGN describes itself as "the #1 destination for all video game news, expert reviews, and walkthroughs" (*IGN,* 2019). The site is consistently ranked as one of the web's most visited gaming journalism websites (*SimilarWeb,* 2019). The site's homepage features five distinct sections: news, video, reviews, shows, and wikis. The bulk of IGN's content is devoted to the newest information in gaming and 'geek' culture, including the announcement of new games, gaming consoles, movies, and television shows, as well as reviews. The site also features a number of digital video series devoted to specific consoles, game walkthroughs, e-sports coverage and general gaming news. Much of IGN's day to day content appears to be written by freelance writers, with its editorial staff handling reviews and hosting the site's video content. While the majority of *IGN's* editorial staff consists of white men, they do have a number of non-white editors on staff, including their streaming television editor, who is the sites' lone black staff member. The lack of black staff editors may have influenced the sites' pitch call, as the dearth of black editors may limit the sites' pool of potential black writers.

While IGN is one of the most visited gaming sites on the internet, it has a mixed reputation in gaming culture, with some commentators claiming that the site is the "advertising arm of the gaming industry masquerading as news and reviews," and others describing the sites' community as 'toxic', due to the regular occurrence of racist and

sexist language on IGN comment pages and forums (2018WorldCup, 2018; Shiryeon, 2018). One of their contributors has stated that IGN is one of the more socially progressive gaming sites, as it provides a platform for gamers from underrepresented groups to discuss the intersections between videogames, race, and accessibility, indicating a larger shift in gaming culture from days "when it was four sweaty white dudes yelling racial slurs on publications' podcasts" (Personal communication, 2019).

While this contributor indicated that *IGN* often publishes stories related to marginalized and underrepresented groups' experiences with video game culture, the vast majority of content posted to the site is focused upon news and reviews aimed at gamers in general. *IGN's* black history month series was therefore a departure from the sites' usual content, as it focused upon how individuals' identities shaped their reception and experiences of gaming rather than addressing an all-encompassing gamer identity. This was a risk for *IGN*; as Condis notes, many self described 'gamers' are hostile to the deployment of other identities other than that of the gamer, which is often viewed as white, male and heterosexual (Condis, 2015). Attempts to represent racial, sexual and gender diversity within gaming is often viewed as an effort to bring politics into what many gamers consider to be an apolitical medium (.ibid). *IGN* seemed conscious of this in their deployment of their black history month pieces, as all comments for the pieces required moderator review before being posted, indicating that *IGN* either experienced or anticipated a backlash from users hostile to the centering of any identities other than that of the gamer. As I will discuss in the proceeding sections, leadership at *IGN* seems to be

taking efforts to diversify its content in an attempt to communicate how individual and group identities impact the gaming experience.

Methods

On February 4, 2019, Lucy O'Brien, executive editor for features at gaming website IGN, posted the following Tweet from her personal account:

> FREELANCE ALERT! We're looking for black writers to contribute to IGN for Black History Month. Have you got a unique take on a video game or the industry? We want to hear from you!
> Pitch me at features@ign.com
> Please RT! @WritersofColor - @Luceobrien, February 4, 2019

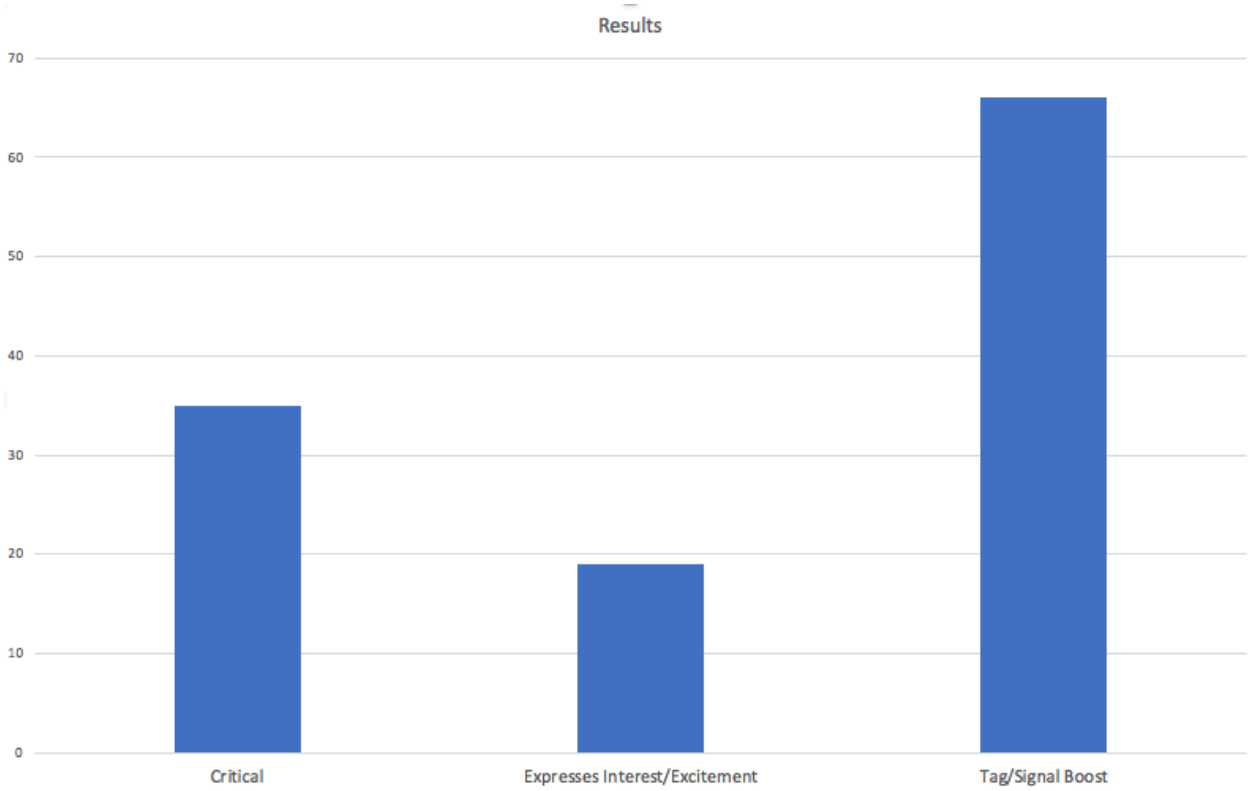
This tweet generated 128 replies, 1,284 retweets and 1,119 likes, as well as over 56 'quote tweets.' I categorized all responses to this tweet, both in terms of direct replies as well as quote tweets. Responses were broken into three categories, which emerged via my investigation into the pitch call's reception. These categories are follows: those that were critical of *IGN*'s pitch call and the website's overall commitment to racial diversity, those that indicated their interest or excitement at writing for *IGN*, and those that either forwarded the pitch call to other writers in the form of 'tagging' their Twitter handle or otherwise posted about the opportunity in the form of a 'signal boost.' I analyzed the response each individual user made to the original post, logging the user name and category of discourse into an Excel spreadsheet. I proceeded to tally the number of entries that fit each particular discourse, investigating those that did not fit neatly into either category. I disqualified all responses from users that appeared to be 'trolls', most of whom questioned the need for a black history series and/or accused *IGN* of racism for having such a series. In an attempt to determine the extent to which O'Brien's pitch call

facilitated the eventual selection of published articles, I reached out to all five writers who had pieces published in IGN's black history month series, either by email or Twitter direct message. I was able to get in direct contact with two featured writers, speaking to one over the phone and the other via email. I asked how they had found out about IGN's black history month series and if they had any contacts at IGN before submission. I also investigated the Twitter networks and publication histories of the five writers whose pieces were selected for publication in the aims of determining the extent to which online networks and past writing experience facilitated the publication of their work.

Results

Out of the 84 direct replies to O'Brien's initial tweet, 20 were categorized as 'critical', 16 were categorized as 'interested/excited', and 31 responses were categorized as 'signal boosting'. 16 responses were disregarded, as they were categorized as 'trolling/racist' or did not express a categorizable response. Out of the 56 available quote tweets replying to O'Brien's initial post, 15 were categorized as 'critical', 35 were categorized as 'signal boosting', with an additional 3 categorized as 'interested/excited'. An additional 4 quote tweets were disregarded, as they were either racist/troll posts or contained information that made them uncategorizable.

Figure One: Responses to *IGN's* Pitch Call



Interested Parties

The majority of responses categorized as 'interested/excited' were generated by Twitter users who appeared to have little experience with the publishing industry or the pitch process. Users @iamkdjiah, @tyrophant, and @OverTheRinabow responded to O'Brien's post with specific questions regarding the pitch process, including deadlines for submission, the nature of content requested, and expected response time. These users had between 204 and 685 Twitter followers, indicating that their online networks were rather small. Despite the size of these users' networks, O'Brein responded to each of their questions individually. These exchanges indicate that Twitter may provide unknown

writers with small networks to obtain information that previously required facetime or having a personal contact with an editor. While none of these users' pitches were published by *IGN*, their interactions with O'Brien likely equipped them with more knowledge regarding the pitch process than they would have had previously, which could ease future attempts at publication.

Criticisms

Virtually all critical responses to O'Brien's post focused upon the lack of black staffers at *IGN* as well as the lack of consistent work opportunities for black writers. Four of these responses came in the form of quote tweets that criticized the ubiquity of posts like O'Brien's while simultaneously forwarding the opportunity to black writers. The response that garnered the most user engagement came from user @Nikyatu who wrote:

> BREAKING: Black Writers do not stop being Writers before or after Black History Month and if your staff has to put out a Twitter search for them during the shortest month of the year then... You know what, get your checks Black Writers. Sigh. - @Nikyatu, February 4, 2019

This response garnered 484 retweets and 1,259 likes. While it is difficult to ascertain why so many users engaged with @Nikyatu's post, the fact that it received more likes than O'Brien's original tweet indicates this sentiment may be common amongst a segment of Twitter users, many of whom may be black writers. While O'Brien did not reply to this tweet, she did respond to a similar quote Tweet from @DavdDTSS, a verified Twitter user who likewise questioned the need for publications to call for black writers once a year.

Hey, I am absolutely looking for black writers the other 11 months. We just wanted to spotlight & elevate voices for this particular month, as well. We do the same for pride, IWD etc. - @Luceobrien, February 5, 2019

Criticisms posted to Twitter likely prompted O'Brien to post an addendum to her original Tweet, encouraging black writers to continue to send in pitches after the month of February. That O'Brien felt the need to respond to her critics indicates that networks like Twitter can be used to bring inequities in the publishing world to attention of those with positions of power in the industry. While racial homogeneity of the publishing industry is well documented, editors attempting to address the issue might be unsure as to the appropriate response. Feedback on platforms such as Twitter can allow those in positions of power to identify problems faced by marginalized writers and shift their business practices accordingly.

Signal Boosts

Signal boosting refers to the process in which Twitter users retweet or quote-tweet Twitter content in an attempt to bring it to the attention of their followers. In this context, signal boosts should be viewed as an endorsement of a pitch opportunities, as the signal booster is actively encouraging their network to send in pitches. Users who practice signal boosting may have a "strategic" understanding of their imagined Twitter audience, "identifying [their] specific [and] pragmatic" needs, for which they provide content for accordingly (Marwick and boyd, 2010; pg. 120). Users who signal boosted *IGN's* pitch call likely had an imagined audience that consisted, at least partially, of black writers. Due to the pure volume of posts categorized as 'signal boosting,' I was unable to investigate the network of each 'tagged' user or determine if their handle was tagged

multiple times. Despite this drawback, it became clear that the majority of users who were tagged had with relatively small networks; I was unable to identify any tagged user who had over 9,000 Twitter followers. Many of these users thanked those that brought the post to their attention and indicated their intention to submit a pitch. The high volume of signal-boosting posts indicates that many the non-freelancers have imagined audiences of black freelancers, which they seek to support via Twitter content.

Selected Writers

In an effort to determine the extent to which online networks influence the pitch and publication process, I examined the Twitter accounts of all five writers selected for publication, noting if they were following the Writers of Color account or if there were any clear commonalities in terms of network size and composition. Four of the five writers whose work was selected for publication followed the Writers of Color Twitter account, which may have alerted them to *IGN's* black history month series. There were no clear commonalities amongst writers in terms of network size; 'follower' counts ranged from 650 to 2,476, with no clear pattern in terms of 'follower' to 'following' ratio.

In addition to examining the Twitter networks of selected writers, I investigated their publication histories in an attempt to determine if there were commonalities in terms of their level of experience in the publishing industry. Three of the five writers had over 100 publication credits from a variety of publications; none had previous publication credits from *IGN*, indicating that their experience in the publishing industry may have

facilitated the acceptance of their pitches.[1] While the remaining two writers appeared to have less than 10 publication credits, one had previously written two separate bylines for *IGN*, and was an interview respondents, who stated that his personal connections at *IGN* facilitated his article's publication.

I was able to get in direct contact with two of the five published authors, both of whom were following the Writers of Color account; I asked them how they learned about *IGN's* black history month series and if they had any contacts at the outlet prior to sending in their pitches. Both respondents indicated they had personal contacts at *IGN* before publishing. The first author was friends with a former editor who both alerted him to the opportunity and assured him he would receive a recommendation. He had been an active freelancer for over ten years, with bylines at *MTV News*, *SoulTrain.com*, *VIBE,* and many others; this extensive publication history, in addition to his personal connection, likely helped facilitate the placement of his work. The second respondent had previously written articles for *IGN* and was contacted directly by one of the sites' editors with a request to contribute. His first published article for *IGN* was focused upon black cowboys in the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*; his proven ability to produce content focused upon the intersections between black identity and videogames likely led to his *IGN* commission. While I was unable to get in contact with the other three writers, a search for their names on the outlet's website indicated that none of them had previously written for IGN. This indicates that while Twitter accounts such as Writers of Color bring writing

[1] One of these writers was an interview respondent, who indicated that one of his personal contacts has provided him with a recommendation for the job.

opportunities to the attention of those operating outside of professional networks, personal contacts continue to play a key role in being selected for publication.

Conclusion

Investigation into IGN's black history month series indicates that while online networks such as Writers of Color provide opportunities for both established and lesser known black writers to learn about pitch opportunities, interact with editors, and bring issues of equity to the attention of those in positions of power, personal contacts remain an important component in being selected for publication. The volume of criticism directed at IGN, as well as O'Brien's attempts at transparency in discussing the outlet's relative lack of racial diversity indicates that editors seeking to build goodwill among black writers need to take extra steps in terms of recruiting talent, or at the very least, be more tactful in their attempts. While developing writers have stated that Writers of Color is a valuable resource that allows them to gather important information regarding pitch opportunities and rate setting, my investigation into IGN indicates that the resource may be more beneficial to established writers with extensive publication histories. While developing writers with a working knowledge of the pitch process may be able to utilize the account to gain publication credits, complete novices may require additional sources of support.

Chapter 4: Twitter and Social Capital: Access to Social Resources

Online social networks allow users to develop both strong and weak ties through which they can develop social resources. The lack of in person networks and visible black freelancers has been established as a barrier that hinders black writers' entry into the publishing industry (Seldon, 2017). Micro-blogging and social networking site Twitter is unbounded by time and geography and allows black freelancers to expand their professional networks and gain social capital through information gathering. The site provides a forum for black writers to discuss issues around freelancing and equal pay, gather information related to professional associations, discuss negative experiences with editors and publications, and critique published works in order to identify predatory editorial practices. As will be discussed in my interview section, this information benefits both developing and established black freelancers, as it allows them to gather social resources that are difficult to obtain without access to professional networks.

Social Networks and Social Capital

Investigations into social networks indicate that personal connections are a significant source of social resources or "valued goods in society," which include employment, information, and influence (Lin, 1999; pg. 467). Social resources are "accessible through ones direct and indirect ties," or relationships, which, before the rise of online, networked communication, were once limited by geographic location (.ibid; pg. 468). Ties between persons are categorized as either strong or weak, the latter of which is characterized by limited "emotional intensity,….intimacy,…and…reciprocal services" (Granovetter, 1973; pg.1361). Scholarly investigations into weak ties and

resource acquisition indicate that the former often allow individuals to access desired social resources, such as employment (.ibid). Weak ties "link individuals to other social circles for information not likely to be available in their own circles" and allow individuals to receive "crucial information" (Lin, 1999; pg. 469; Granovetter, 1973; pg. 1378). Maintaining extensive networks of both strong and weak ties allow individuals to develop social capital, or extended access to "crucial information" (Bourdieu, 1986; Granovetter, 1973; pg. 1378).

Investigations into online social networks indicate that "computer-supported specialized relationships [provide] a basis for interest-based structures that provide support, partial solidarity, and vehicles for aggregating and articulating interests," as well as increase "the geographical diversity of social ties" (Wellman, 2002; pg. 16; Sooryamoorthy, et al., 2008). This indicates that online social networks hold the potential to expand black freelancers' access to diverse social resources and development of social capital via weak ties, which allow them to access information outside of their personal networks.

Centering Black Women Freelancers

Founded by the National Committee for Pay Equity on April 2, 1996, Equal Pay Day began "as a public awareness event to illustrate the gap between men's and women's wages" (National Committee on Pay Equity, 2019). While past and present Equal Pay Days have featured physically based events and rallies, Twitter allows for a virtual dimension that allows women to discuss their issues with unequal pay to a larger audience. Black women have used the #EqualPayDay hashtag to bring light to specific

issues of inequality they face as freelancers, focusing upon issues of late payment. Twitter allows other users to support black women freelancers by supporting their claims of unequal treatment by providing personal anecdotes and first-hand experiences. In addition to this form of support, hashtags such as #EqualPayDay lead to larger conversations focused upon freelancer's rights and vulnerabilities that allow freelancers to gain access to information and resources they otherwise might not have.

On April 2, 2019, Desi-Kenyan writer and long-time freelancer Lara Witt utilized the #EqualPayDay hashtag as an opportunity to center the specific difficulties faced by non-white women engaging in freelance writing. Witt began her thread by announcing that she was still owed $500 dollars from a magazine piece she had written in late December. "I'm lucky to have a job that pays me enough," said Witt. "If I relied solely on freelance payments I wouldn't have been able to pay most of my bills in January. During #EqualPayDay we should also discuss how many WOC freelancers are chasing clients to get paid for work we've already done." While Witt's thread received a number of responses in solidarity and support, including retweets and likes that increased the post's visibility, one commentator took issue with the centering of non-white freelancers, arguing that issues of non-payment affect freelance writers as a whole. Witt responded by saying that this was a

> "Predictable response. WOC writers/freelancers are given fewer opportunities, consistently paid less and have to deal with micro and macro aggressions that other[s] don't have to. It. Adds. Up. Especially when you have chase clients to get paid"

Nilan Lovelace, a male freelance writer based out of Los Angeles, responded to this post in support of Witt's claims, citing his personal experience with late payments as

evidence. Lovelace stated that he "can go to the client, bring it up, and payment is being processed with proof of confirmation and it hit my account 4 days later...I regularly hear about WoC who don't even get a response for months on end on multiple contracts." Sharing this personal anecdote allowed Lovelace to substantiate Witt's claims of unequal payment, which not only bolstered her original assertion, but served as a defense against hostile users. While online services such as Who Pays Writers? collect anonymous data on publications' payment scales and speed of receipt, they do not contain demographic data that allows freelancers from traditionally marginalized groups to express or identify experiences of discrimination (Who Pays Writers?, 2019). Twitter allowed Witt to communicate her experiences with late payments to a receptive audience and generate a larger conversation around black women's experiences with freelancing and exploitation.

While Witt's Twitter thread allowed her to gain support from other writers and Twitter users, it also served as a starting point for conversations around equity and freelancing, which allowed users to connect to previously unknown resources. Tracy Clayton, a black freelance writer, podcast host, and former BuzzFeed employee, quote tweeted Witt's thread in order to express her uncertainty and fear surrounding freelancing. "As a new freelancer I am terrified," said Clayton. "A lot of the work that women of color do, freelancers & beyond, happens on social media…. but that's rarely considered actual work by anyone so that also goes unpaid and unrecognized...if you've ever asked how you can support me without supporting [BuzzFeed], my venmo & cashme are in my bio." Communicating her specific vulnerabilities and fears allowed

sympathetic readers to both understand the particular difficulties Clayton experienced as a black woman freelancer as well as make efforts to support her accordingly.

Expressing her uncertainties around freelancing led a number of writers to connect with Clayton, offering her advice and resources in addition to emotional support. Erin Biba, a science journalist, responded to Clayton's tweet with a warning that "25% of [her] job will now be collections." Talia Lavan, a Brooklyn based freelancer interjected in the conversation to provide a link to the Twitter account for the International Workers of the World Freelance Journalists' Union, which is seeking to address issues of nonpayment for freelancers. Another user, @erinscafe, discussed the possibility of starting a collection service for freelance writers based upon the users' experience at a law firm focused upon worker's compensation, a service that Clayton described as "much needed." This comment drew the attention of a number of other writers and editors, who discussed their issues with the lack of standardization around invoice requests and payments.

The above conversations indicate that, by discussing their specific vulnerabilities as freelancers, black writers are able to use Twitter to gain support and acknowledgement from other writers, gain access to resources and information, as well as expand discussions around unequal pay and freelancing. By providing freelance writers with a platform that is unbounded by time and geography, Twitter allows conversations to both spread and diverge, allowing black freelancers to gain access to information and resources of which they were previously unaware.

"Are You in a Journalism Association?"

While Twitter allows black freelance writers to generate conversations related to risk and uncertainty that allows them to gain unsolicited access to information and resources, the platform also allows them to ask explicit questions regarding the utility of available resources. One such post was generated on April 6, 2019, by Clarissa Brooks, an Atlanta based freelance writer. Brooks asked:

Freelancers: Do y'all go to journalism conferences? Are you in a journalism association?

This tweet sparked a number of conversations regarding the value of journalism conferences and associations, as well as general advice regarding networking as a freelancer. Twenty-three separate freelancers responded to Brook's post, many of whom shared their personal experiences with journalism associations and conferences, as well as specific strategies for networking as a freelancer. Many of these responses were focused upon the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), of which Brooks is a member. Taylor Crumpton, an Oakland based freelance writer, responded to Brooks' post with questions regarding the price points and benefits of NABJ membership, which received responses from both Brooks and Julia Namaste, an Oakland based freelance writer. This allowed Crumpton to not only to gain formation related to NABJ membership, but also make plans to connect with Namaste at future conferences. Conversations around NABJ membership caught the attention of younger freelancers who were unfamiliar with the association, including Gloria Oladipo, a Chicago based freelance writer and college student, who was able to gain information about the existence of the program through this Twitter thread.

Other freelancers discussed their personal experiences with professional associations, offering general advice regarding networking as a freelancer. Texas based freelancer Daniel Johnson stated that conferences and professional association had limited utility in terms of networking. He claimed that "networking is something that happens as you build relationships with other writers/editors...sometimes you're in contact with people who have pretty good connects." This sentiment was echoed by Malaika Jabali, a Brooklyn based freelancer, who added that "the main benefit [of conferences] are the workshops...at conferences everyone is too busy & every writer [probably] starts seeming the same." This information allows freelancers who are unfamiliar with professional associations to gain information regarding their utility and shift their expectations accordingly. Other freelance writers, such as New York City based writer and editor Lily Herman, offered to direct message Brooks with networking advice, while others mentioned that joining professional associations could be written off as business expenses.

Responses to Brooks' Twitter post indicates that the social networking platform allows black freelancers to gauge the utility of freelancing resources by asking direct questions to their online networks. These conversations benefit not only the original user, but any other users who may come in contact with the post, as indicated through Oladipo and Crumpton's replies, who gathered information related to professional networks. Because Twitter is unbounded by time and geography, users from a variety of locations are able to give their input and opinions, which can combat a lack of access to professional networks. These interactions indicate that Twitter can serve as a mentorship

resource for young and developing writers, offering them essential guidance and information that allows them to navigate digital publishing. While mentorship has traditionally been a valuable resource for developing writers, Twitter and other digital resources allow young writers to connect with mentors that were previously largely accessed through higher education programs and geographic proximity (Liontas, 2015; Skinner, 2001). Twitter's utility as a mentorship tool may be contingent on the size and composition of users' networks. Brooks' Twitter account has almost 21,000 followers, many of whom are active freelancers and journalists. While new freelancers whose networks are limited in size can latch on to discussions regarding the utility of available resources, their ability to generate conversations may be limited, as their online networks might lack the reach and spread needed to gain diverse and varied opinions.

"I Like the Writing, But We Already Have a Black Author"

In addition to providing important information and advice regarding pay disparities and professional associations, Twitter allows black writers to discuss experiences of racism with editors, giving other black freelance writers knowledge regarding the proliferation of racism in the industry and methods for navigating them. While racism in the publishing industry is not a new phenomenon Twitter allows black writers to transmit their experiences to a larger audience, allowing other black writers to identify difficulties inherent to the profession and alert white editors to the demoralizing effects of racially insensitive responses and edits (Newkirk, 2000).

On July 27, 2018, Tade Thompson, a Yoruba psychiatrist and science fiction author, produced a Twitter thread in response to "someone [he] know[s] being told

publicly that they only got published due to [racial] quota systems" The thread detailed Thompson's experience with racist rejections in the publishing industry, and how these experiences inhibit black writers from developing and improving their craft. Thompson began the thread by detailing

> Actual responses [he's] received as part of rejection letters: 1. "I like the writing, but we already have a black author." 2. "If you can change the indicated words in the manuscript we will accept it. I'm just not convinced that Africans would use such complicated English terms."

Thompson claimed that his experience was not unique, as "any PoC writer you know who submits work to markets…have similar stories to tell. Or they may choose to be quiet about it." He went on to state that these experiences inhibit the artistic development of non-white writers, as it is difficult to "improve your craft when you cannot be sure why exactly your work is getting rejected." He remarked that "fewer PoC published means fewer opportunities for mentoring and fewer editors who understand different storytelling traditions," a roadblock for black writers established in extant literature (Newkirk, 2000).

A number of black writers replied to Thompson's thread detailing their own experiences with racist rejections and how such incidents make it difficult to progress in the industry. One such respondent was Linda Chavers, a Massachusetts based teacher and writer who said that Thompson's thread confirmed her "black writer insecurities," tagging a number of writers and editors in her reply. One such user was Lisa Mecham, a white writer and editor, who encouraged Chavers to persevere through racist rejections. She argued that "rejections are one thing, small minded, racist rejections are another.

Don’t submit [to these publications] again. Keep writing. Keep reading. You’ll find the right place that will celebrate your work.” Chavers responded by saying that “once you get a racist [rejection] your paranoia colors (pardon the pun) all the rest,” indicating that such rejections can have a demoralizing effect on black writers and prevent them from pursuing future efforts at publication. Mecham encouraged Chavers to submit a piece to The Rumpus, a literary magazine edited by Mecham, stating that “I can guarantee you won’t be treated that way. Please send it in.” This exchange indicates that Twitter not only allows black writers to connect over issues of racism and discrimination but enables non-black editors to identify problem areas for black writers and take steps to address them.

When asked why he produced this Twitter thread, Thompson stated that it was done in order “to let others know what we all go through so they won't give up or be discouraged.” This indicates that some black writers share their experiences with racism in the publishing world via Twitter in order to provide support to both established and emerging black writers. Thompson’s thread received 5,310 retweets and 10,963 likes, indicating that the thread likely reached a number of black writers who have gone through similar experiences.

“A Lot of White Editors Simply Don’t Have the Range”

Thompson’s thread is not the only instance of black writers using Twitter to detail their negative experiences with editors. On February 5, 2019, Zoé Samudzi, an Oakland based PhD candidate and freelance writer, used Twitter to share an anecdote regarding her difficulties with white editors. Samudzi’s anecdote was produced in response to a

Twiter post by Sarah Marian Seltzer, an editor for *Lilith* magazine, an independent publication focused on Jewish feminism. Seltzer posted a .gif expressing displeasure with the accompanying remark “Me whenever a writer receives my edits and writes back "I prefer we run it as I originally wrote it, actually!"

Samudzi utilized twitter’s ‘quote’ function to respond to Seltzer’s post with the following anecdote:

> Once I wrote a piece about epistemic violence and knowledge production and deliberately wrote something in AAVE which the editor changed. And it both entirely changed the statement’s meaning AND reified the power dynamic my piece sought to criticize….So I understand where this is coming from, but I want to respectfully (or not) say that a lot of white editors simply don’t have the range for the layers and complexities that can come with black people’s writing on particular topics.

Samudzi’s post received responses from other black writers who had similar experiences with editors. One came from Twitter user @_phaentom_, a black writer based out of Denver, Colorado, who discussed how he had a “white editor who changed Juneteenth to Juneteeth.” Another came from Bolue Babalola, a culture columnist for pop culture publication Dazed, who recounted an experience where “upon writing a dark-skinned female character I got asked to make her ‘less cocky.’” Samudzi engaged in conversation with both of these writers, asking them to explain the rationale the editors supplied, as well as the eventual outcome. These exchanges indicate that Twitter provides a support network for black writers dealing with editors who lack the cultural competency to properly engage with and edit their work, letting them know that they are not alone in their struggles. Just as with Thompson’s thread, the public nature of these conversations allows emerging writers to gain insight into the publishing industry and the

difficulties they will face. Metzer eventually responded to Samudzi's post, clarifying that she was "talking about rejecting an entire slate of edits offhand," a clarification that received no response. In this way, Twitter allows white editors to hear the frustrations black writers experience and perhaps alter their editorial approaches accordingly.

The above accounts recall investigations into the experiences of black journalists working in the newsrooms of the 1990s, who were expected to produce work that catered to the viewpoints and desires of white readers (Newkirk, 2000). Thompson and Samudzi's Twitter threads indicate that, while this practice may continue, black writers can utilize Twitter to express their experiences with racism in the publishing industry, which not only allows them to connect with other writers who may have had similar experiences but broadcast this information to those seeking entry to the publishing industry. In addition to connecting black writers with information and networks, these conversations draw the attention of white editors, who are given the option to reflect and perhaps change their editorial practices.

"The formula is predatory and tired"

While Twitter allows black writers to support one another by recounting instances of racist rejections and culturally insensitive edits, black writers' critiques of published works likewise allows them to identify and denounce structural issues inherent to the publishing industry. While these critiques can be scathing, their public nature allows developing writers to develop a critical eye and recognize the importance of gaining feedback from culturally engaged writers and editors.

On August 2, 2018, black writer and social critic Trudy took to Twitter to criticize a piece submitted to women's magazine *Marie Claire* entitled, "I'm Latina, and I Find Rihanna's Skinny Brows Problematic," written by Krystyna Chávez, the publication's social media editor. Chávez's piece asserts that pop star Rihanna's appearance on the cover of the August issue of Vogue magazine, which featured the singer wearing "skinny eyebrows', was a harmful appropriation of Latinx street culture. Trudy critiqued both the content of this piece, as well as the outlet's rationale for publishing it:

> I just saw the "Rihanna appropriated eyebrows" conversation and I just want some of you to find another profession. Cultural criticism and "social justice writing" ain't it. Like there's other things to do. Find one of those and study well and do well. This ain't it folks…..the desperation and attraction to this specific type of writing #onhere without preparation and combined with predatory publications looking for new scapegoats each week? Ain't the wave.

Dr. Eve Ewing, a sociologist of education and assistant professor at The University of Chicago, replied in agreement, stating that the article was "straight out of 2010...the formula is predatory and tired...It makes me sad because I feel like a lot of young writers of color basically get the message that this is the only way for them to have a lane or get published at all." Trudy agreed, stating that "Young White writers can write about anything and have time to get good at it. Or stay terrible and still get paid. With PoC it seems like even unprepared on cultural topics is 'ok' as long as PoC. Which means not producing good stuff with editors who truly guide/help." This sentiment was echoed by a number of Twitter users, who likewise focused upon how the editorial process allows, and perhaps encourages, non-white writers to produce exploitative work. Much like black writers' use of Twitter to recount racist interactions with editors, the

public nature of this conversation allows black writers to identify how they are disadvantaged by the structure of the publishing industry, which continues to be dominated by white editors without the funds of knowledge or care to properly evaluate their work.

Similar criticisms were levied against a piece published in the New York Times' "Modern Love" column in March of 2019, entitled "I Broke Up With Her Because She's White." Written by Christopher Rivas, a Dominican-American actor and storyteller based in Los Angeles, the piece claims that "today's hashtag-woke society" led Rivas to end a relationship with his white girlfriend. The article was quickly derided by a number of black writers via Twitter, who viewed the piece as both exploitative and sub-par. While these critiques discussed issues inherent to the work's content and execution, the focal point of criticism was levied against the publications' editors. One such critique came from Zoe Samudzi, who said that "every good writer needs friends to tell them to push away their keyboard and say no to that editor who clearly doesn't care about you." Rudo Midiwa, a black writer based out of Zimbabwe, replied in agreement, stating that the piece featured "not only shitty writing but … clear signs that he has not thought about this enough to be writing an essay on it. editors really set him up." Samudzi went on to share how she had a similar piece published in her early 20s, which she looked back upon in embarrassment. Because these critiques and personal experiences are shared in a public forum, developing writers are able to identify the importance of culturally competent feedback, the lack of which can lead to embarrassment and regret.

While many black writers used Rivas' column as an opportunity to criticize the editorial process of large publications, others directly dispensed advice to developing writers seeking to avoid such experiences. Van Newkirk, a contributor to *The Atlantic* and cofounder of the web publication *Seven Scribes*, alluded to the article with the following remark:

> My advice to young writers of color has always been to protect your byline. There are very few big places equipped or interested enough to keep you from dragging yourself with a bad take that'll lead your google search results forever

Newkirk's advice was a subtle form of critique aimed at helping young black writers develop an awareness of how they are often disadvantaged by editors without the interest or cultural competency to properly evaluate their work.

Pamela Newkirk's investigation into 1990s' print publications revealed that white editors often encouraged or limited black writers to writing about issues of culture, prioritizing discussions that titillated white audiences (Newkirk, 2000). The above instances indicate that white editors continue to exploit the identities of writers of color for their audiences. Critics argued that Chávez's work was an exploitation of her Mexican-American identity, one that was published by editors in the interest of generating internet outrage and "hate-clicks." Similar evaluations were made of Rivas' work, as critics faulted the white editors who enabled him to publish an underdeveloped think-piece that blamed black people for his anxieties surrounding interracial dating. Online forums such as Twitter allow black writers to bring attention to and critique such predatory and exploitative editorial practices. While these criticisms do not directly counter uncaring, insensitive, or exploitative editorial practices, these public discussions

allow developing writers to identify potential pitfalls and adjust their writing practices accordingly.

Conclusion

As an online social network, Twitter allows writers to engage in conversation and gather information from both direct and indirect ties. All of the conversations discussed in this section were gathered via my use of an anonymous Twitter account actively following dozens of black freelance writers. That I was able to gather the above information without interacting with any of the users in question indicates that Twitter enables black freelancers to utilize indirect and weak ties to gather important social resources. Whether they're looking for strategies on navigating late payments, racially insensitive editors, or improving their craft through creative critique, Twitter provides black freelancers with information that allows them to navigate digital publishing, an assertion that will be strengthened in my interview responses.

Chapter 5: Interviews

In an effort to deepen my understanding of the ways in which Twitter and other digital communities serve as a tool for black freelance writers, I conducted in depth interviews with three black freelancers based in North America. All three respondents were found during my investigations into freelance journalists' use of Twitter. I reached out to respondents for interviews either through e-mail or Twitter direct messages. Interviews were conducted by telephone and Skype and ranged from 47 minutes to an hour and ten minutes. Respondent profiles are as follows:

"Orlando" was a black male in his early 30s living in Los Angeles, who had written for a variety of online publications, including *IGN, MTVNews,* and *Hip-HopDX*. He graduated from a Louisiana based HBCU in the late 2000s, where he received an undergraduate degree in journalism. In addition to his work as a freelancer, he held a full-time position as an editor at a Los Angeles based digital media company. As of April 14, 2019, his Twitter account featured 2,492 followers.

"Tremel" was a 20-year-old black male living in Toronto, Canada, where he was pursuing an undergraduate degree in journalism. Primarily focused upon video game journalism, Tremel had publication credits at *IGN* and *VICE*, as well as an independent outlet he ran with a number of his friends. As of April 14, 2019, his Twitter account featured 2,390 followers.

"Angela" was a 19-year-old black woman and undeclared undergraduate student attending a university in the northeast United States, who had been writing for a little

over a year. She had written opinion pieces for online outlets *WearYourVoice*, *Bustle* and *RaceBaitr.* As of April 14, 2019, her Twitter account featured 141 followers.

All respondents indicated that their use of Twitter had a positive effect on their writing careers, as the platform allowed them to identify work opportunities, establish professional contacts, generate story ideas, and gather information on the publishing industry from other writers, strengthening assertions made in previous sections regarding Twitter's ability to connect black freelancers with social resources. Respondents' characterization of their use of digital technologies aligns with Julian Kücklich's conception of "playbor." Playbor refers to the productive labor social media users perform for site owners (Scholz, 2017; Kücklich, 2009). While users may take pleasure in their access to and use of the information available on sites such as Twitter, site owners continually mine the data of these users their own purposes "effectively [masking] labour as play, and [disguising] the process of self-expropriation as self-expression" (Scholz, 2017; Kücklich, 2009). While respondents' use of Twitter aligns with this definition of playbor, as their data is mined by the platform's owners while they utilize the site for personal pleasure, these writers in turn extract value from the platform in the form of information access, which they then use to identify and obtain job opportunities. Orlando's experience as an active freelancer in the late aughts mirrored Gill's "key features of new media work" as his experience was characterized by low pay, long hours and a need to develop self-taught skills. Orlando indicated that access to online networks and resources aimed at black freelancers might have alleviated some of the difficulties he faced early in his career, furthering assertions that digital technologies

hold the potential to combat black freelancers' lack of social resources and access to professional networks.

Twitter and Professional Connections

All three respondents stated that Twitter provided them with access to professional connections that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain, such as the contact information and professional interests of editors. Both Tremel and Angela were undergraduate students who were still developing their writing careers and therefore did not have an established list of contacts. Twitter allowed them to identify publication editors and contact information that would have otherwise been inaccessible. As Angela stated: "It's pretty hard to find the contact information of editors [on publications' websites]... but weirdly enough, its always in the [editors'] Twitter bios." Twitter allowed her to identify specific editors and send them targeted pitches, which she viewed as "pretty amazing, because when you only have an email to operate from and you have to seek these things out, it's a lot more difficult."

Tremel likewise stated that Twitter allowed him to identify and send in targeted pitches to editors of interest. "You're not taught who to email your pitch [to,]" he said. "Twitter is great because most editors have their email addresses and what to pitch them [in their bios]. When [you] see an editor tweet about stuff, you kind of know what their interests are and know what they like, what ideas they're down with," which allows writers to craft pitches targeted at editors' specific interests. This line of thinking was echoed by Orlando, who stated that "[With] Twitter you get a historical reference for when people are thinking about something and how long or how they changed over

time…it's a good way of seeing where your skillset is needed and if you [have] a shot at displaying [it]."

In addition to identifying editors and crafting pitches aimed at their specific interests, respondents indicated that Twitter allowed them to reach out to publication editors in a more informal manner, which allayed some of their anxieties regarding the pitch process. After receiving his first paid publication credit at *IGN*, Tremel was able to establish a more informal relationship with the sites' editors, which allowed him to send them direct messages regarding pitch ideas via Twitter. As he stated: "It just feels so much more comfortable to DM someone. I don't have to stress about [not hearing back, or pitching the wrong person], which is just such a huge thing to deal with when you're freelancing…the anxieties are just gone with Twitter." Angela likewise stated that Twitter made her more comfortable with approaching editors, as she is often "very nervous about contacting [editors.] Twitter definitely humanizes a lot of them and makes them seem more approachable." Orlando stated that digital technologies allowed him to "[develop] a network of people [early in my career]…I did that purely on a digital factor," which enabled him to gain access to future job opportunities. This allowed him to bypass the lack of professional connections he was afforded from his universities' journalism department.

While Orlando echoed Tremel and Angela's thoughts regarding Twitter's ability to connect one with professional contacts, his perspective was informed by his experiences as an emerging writer in the late 2000s, where the pitch process necessitated mailing physical material and was therefore much more arduous, as the process involved

a good deal of time and money. Digital technologies alleviated many of these difficulties and allowed him to resend pitches to unresponsive editors: “It can happen with regular email, not hearing anything back, but at least you know if they don’t hit you back you can just send another one. It doesn't take too much time. [I don't have to] go to a post office. I think that’s …the cool thing in regards to Twitter.”

These responses indicate that Twitter allows black freelancers to make professional connections that would have been difficult, if not impossible, without the platform. This allows black freelancers to overcome the lack of access to professional networks that has been established in extant literature (Seldon, 2017; DiTomaso, 2013; Rivera, 2015).

Gathering information on the Industry

Earlier in this report, I identified instances in which black Twitter users utilized the platform to gather inside information on the writing industry that would otherwise be limited to those with professional connections. Both Tremel and Angela related instances wherein they were able to use Twitter to identify and avoid exploitation in the digital publishing industry. Because Orlando was an established freelance writer with over ten years of writing experience, he had less of a need for such resources, as he already had established access to professional networks.

Tremel spent his late teens writing for small gaming publications free of charge, where he was asked to spend an outsized amount of time editing his posts for search engine optimization. While he was promised that his work would allow him to receive

exposure to a larger audience, he was able to use Twitter metrics to recognize that he was being exploited and transition into self-publishing.

Tremel: *I noticed that so many of these accounts bought their followers….you can very obviously tell when someone has 20,000 followers and gets one like per tweet. Honey, those are bought, those are not real. So I saw that on a few of the websites I wrote for, [they had] so many followers, [but not any] likes or interactions…looking at [that] was the final straw. You're promised exposure, you're not getting that and they can't lie to you and say that you are because you obviously aren't.*

This response indicates that, in addition to using the platform to gather information on the publishing industry from other freelancers, Twitter allows writers to conduct independent research into various publications, identifying their reach and reputation.

Angela had been actively writing for a little over a year at the time of our interview and was therefore still developing the skills and knowledge base needed to function as an active freelancer. She stated that the Twitter account Writers of Color allowed her to gain exposure to new publications, as well as connect with other writers to identify their approaches to the publishing industry. In addition to identifying potential publication opportunities, Writers of Color allowed Angela to protect herself from exploitation by establishing boundaries around her labor.

Angela: *[Writers of Color] has been a really helpful educational tool in terms of [identifying] what kind of shady shit goes down in the writing business…its been helpful in establishing boundaries in terms of what is an appropriate thing to pay someone versus what is not an appropriate thing to pay someone.*

Tremel likewise stated that Twitter allowed him to connect with other freelancers, learning from their experiences, as well as sharing his own, which he indicated was an important tool for freelancers looking to navigate the digital publishing industry,

especially those from marginalized groups who may have specific experiences with discrimination.

Tremel: *[It] feels nice to see people starting off or early in the industry growing from Twitter and just talking about their experiences. And they're small threads, but it is so specific and it's such a specific thing because most of the people [writing threads] are people of color or gay or trans as well. And it's like, some of my friends aren't in this industry, even if they are marginalized folks, they don't know the specific feeling that putting my name down being like "Hi I'm [Tremel.]" Like: "What a weirdo, what a name." I don't know, just worrying about that, like did they not respond because of that? Did they not respond because I said I was a black freelancer? .... People talking about these things, even just saying it, making a joke about it, it just calms all my anxieties.... I've had people message me and be like "Oh my god, you spoke about this thing and that made me calmer." I've made a couple of threads on freelancing and my experiences and people actually, respond to those and say "Thank you." Even [when] you're not saying something too deep, it's just that thing that was in the back of their mind that they've been worrying about, like on Twitter, seeing it in a Tweet is like, "Oh, I'm not crazy"*

Both of these anecdotes support earlier assertions in this report regarding black freelancer's use of Twitter to accrue social resources, as the platform allowed respondents to connect and learn from individuals outside of their in-person networks.

Writers of Color and its Utility for Developing Freelancers

My investigation into *IGN's* black history month series indicated that the sites' pitch call, which tagged the Writers of Color Twitter account, benefitted those who had either personal contacts at the outlet or extensive publication histories. However, all three of my respondents, who followed the Writers of Color account on Twitter, indicated that the resource was more useful to developing freelancers who were less familiar with the digital publishing industry. Orlando stated that "Writers of Color and that other stuff, they weren't really around at the time when I probably needed more of that in the everyday. Now, most of the times I'm one or two degrees [separated] from certain

outlets, that if I want to write for [them] I can." Tremel echoed this sentiment, saying that "I feel like they do help people, but I was just like in the trenches getting taking advantage of, realizing shit for myself." These responses, coupled with Angela's assertion that Writers of Color was a "helpful educational tool" indicates that while the pitch opportunities posted to the Writers of Color Twitter account may be more beneficial to established black freelancers, the account also serves as a resource guide for emerging black freelancers that helps acquaint them to the ins and outs of digital publishing.

Twitter as Playbor

Extant literature on digital labor discusses the concept of "playbor," in "which workers are called upon to do what they love…[preforming] productive labor…[that] is no longer understood as work" (Scholz, 2017; pg. 89). Inquiries into playbor often focus upon the ways in which the interests and personal pleasures of users are harnessed and exploited by platform owners in the form of data acquisition. All three respondents indicated that their use of Twitter blurred the lines between work and play, as they used the platform for both personal amusement as well as finding work opportunities, which involved a mix of passive and active use of the platform. While respondents' Twitter usage allowed the platform's owners to extract value in the form of data, these writers were also acquiring value in the form of information access that could be leveraged into job opportunities. This indicates that black freelancer's self-directed playbor allows them to create value for both themselves and the platform's owners.

Tremel indicated that although the vast majority of his time spent on Twitter was for personal enjoyment, he often used posts he found amusing or interesting as sources while writing. As he stated:

Tremel: *I want to say 85% [of my time of Twitter is] fun, a solid 85%. Because like, I'm having fun, but at the same time I'm scrolling and I'm looking at the trends, what are people talking about? Joke trends, game trends, movie trends, like what is the news and what is a pattern? that's part of the fun to me as well. It's kind of the weird like 5% of fun and work, just looking at that stuff, I'll put that into the 90% of stuff that is fun, the other 10% is kind of like…. from the point that I'm done laughing at a tweet, that's when it becomes work"*

Angela had a similar response, stating that "the majority of my time spent on Twitter is in a working capacity, [but that] it feels like fun, it feels like a treasure hunt…it feels like I'm investing in myself in ways that I don't think a lot of opportunities or things feel like."

Orlando stated that Twitter allowed him to access story ideas and job opportunities while passively using the platform. "[Using Twitter is] just something great to do in a passive sense you know? I'm a doing a lot per day, we normally have very busy days. With that said, it's a great way to find what's going on, and then if I want to search something like hey, who's hiring? [I can do that as well.]" This mixed use of the platform was echoed by Tremel, whose first paid writing opportunity came from a mix of passive and active uses of Twitter to actively follow an editor of a publication of interest and found out about the opportunity during a period of downtime.

Twitter: Building an Audience?

Existing literature on internet micro-celebrity indicates that building a following on social media platforms is necessary for users to generate revenue. Investigations into

internet micro-celebrity tend to focus upon the genres of beauty, fashion, and parenting, and are often associated with commercial products, which facilitate partnerships with corporate brands (Abidin, 2017). This reliance upon digital platforms presents a risk for users seeking to generate profit, as they are required to "adapt to the schedules of their virtual bosses," who, on a whim, may change the platform algorithms users rely upon harnessing for influence (Sholz, 2017; pg. 170). While some are creating user owned platforms that allow individuals to "build careers by co-owning the platforms," other digital workers are forming unions "focused [upon] holding [platforms] accountable to [their] ever-changing algorithms and practices" (.ibid, pg. 183; Jennings, 2019). The formation of large "meme unions" on Instagram indicates that an ever growing segment of web users are becoming aware of the value they provide for large tech companies and may continue to agitate for a democratic governance of online platforms (Jennings, 2019).

Because the writing profession has fewer explicit ties to commerce, I expected that cultivating an active following was less important for my respondents. While all three respondents indicated that having a larger audience on Twitter would allow them to gain increased access to writing opportunities, none of them indicated that building a following on the platform was an active concern. Angela stated that Twitter allowed her to gain access to social resources via indirect ties, which came without having a large Twitter following or reciprocal interactions with persons of interest. Orlando gave a similar response, stating that the composition of ones' network was more important than size. Extant literature supports this claim, as "access to hierarchical positions," is more

likely to facilitate "the process of status attainment" than the access to larger networks (Lin, 1999; pg. 470).

Angela: *I don't think [having a large Twitter following] really makes a huge difference in terms of getting jobs, because I think it is really a question of who am I willing to follow, and not even follow, but stalk and get emails and screenshot….I was still able to get [two separate writing] positions having a pretty small Twitter following.*

Orlando: *I don't think editors of big publications will look at Twitter followers and see who has more...If anything it's based on* who *is following you .more than the [actual] bulk of people who are following you."*

The above quote by Orlando, coupled with Tremel's description of how he used Twitter metrics to determine an outlet's reach, indicates that black freelancers' Twitter usage allows them to develop sophisticated insights into the nature of social networks and social capital. This understanding may allow experienced black freelancers to use Twitter as a more effective tool in accruing social resources and social capital.

Tremel's response diverged from the other two respondents, as he stated that having a larger following gave users a certain degree of legitimacy that facilitated job placement, relating a conversation he had with a close friend who was worried about her number of Twitter followers.

Tremel*: People can say they don't care [about the size of their following] but they do…. Like my friend, [she has] 100 followers, 100 following... And she's like "I'm scared because I don't have a following...I'm scared they're going to look at my Twitter." Because ...if you're applying for a job...in the gaming industry...the writing side, people ask for your Twitter handle and if they click on it, they're probably going to judge that…That is a horrible reality but that's what they're judging you on….editors, writers, people reading articles, the audience, really do care about that stuff.*

These responses indicate that while growing a large audience on social networking sites does not prevent or guarantee black freelancers' access to job

opportunities, larger audiences likely open them up to increased job opportunities. None of my respondents had a follower count over 2,500 which likely impacted the nature of their responses. Investigations into the experiences of black writers with larger social media platforms would likely yield different findings.

Making a Living

Orlando was the only respondent who was not currently an undergraduate student and was therefore able to provide more insight into the working life of a black freelancer. His characterization of his early work life fit in with Gill's description of new media work, which is characterized by long hours culture, a need to pick up DIY skills, low pay and precarious work.

The lack of access to professional networks has been established as a hindrance to black freelancer's entry into the digital publishing industry (Seldon, 2017). Orlando's responses supported this finding, as his university did not have a solid network of individuals working in digital media. As he stated: "from a pure economics perspective and jobs perspective, [the network] wasn't really there. Unless I wanted to go into a newspaper, but even that was slim pickings." In addition to lacking access to professional networks, a dearth of personal resources prevented him from taking part in an internship in the journalism industry, which further hindered his professional development. He stated that a number of his friends had similar experiences, with some families taking out second mortgages to fund internship opportunities.

Orlando: *The thing that holds most black writers back, 99% are just finances, because we can't finance our ways as a writer like most white kids can. I'm not saying all do, but we don't have...not only the social but economic capital to push through those hard*

times, so we get kind of stunted in terms of career development because we're so focused on surviving in opposed to just writing.

Orlando's lack of professional connections led him to practice what he described as "the extreme hustle" to establish himself as a writer, working a number of non-writing jobs and donating plasma throughout the week, and writing "6-10 pieces every weekend." This hustle continued even after he obtained a job in the publishing industry, as the pay was so low that he needed to wash trucks to support himself. While he is currently an established professional in the publishing industry, Orlando stated that "It took a minute to get to that point, at one point I kind of became addicted to the hustle. It kind of felt that I was kind of throwing things away for the sake of trying to outwork everyone." He went on to state that this hustle "helped with my survival, because while I was writing I was also gaining [new] skills," such as operating a DSLR camera, which allowed him to gain access to future work opportunities.

Orlando's entry into the publishing began in the late aughts, before the widespread ubiquity of Twitter and other digital resources in the publishing industry. Earlier I related a quote wherein Orlando stated that many of the current digital resources that aim to connect black freelancers with job opportunities, such as Writers of Color, would have helped him develop as a writer early in his career. As he noted, his university's journalism department afforded him few professional connections. Orlando had to build his social capital from the ground up; while he was able to "[develop] a network of people…purely on a digital factor," before Twitter's ubiquity in the journalism industry, the increased presence of writers and editors on the site would have

likely made the work of networking less arduous. This indicates that digital tools could potentially help black journalists counter forms of discrimination and lack of access, building networks via Twitter instead of taking unpaid internships that many cannot afford to take. Both Tremel and Angela were currently students and had already accrued a number of writing credits indicate that digital resources may be helpful to young black writers.

Conclusion

While all of my respondents indicated that they used additional digital resources to access information on the publishing industry, such as e-mail, Facebook, and a Discord server, Twitter's high concentration of writers and editors made the platform essential for those looking to navigate the digital publishing industry. While Angela used Facebook to promote her work and utilized a number of websites focused around freelancing to access information on the publishing industry, Twitter remained her most important tool in terms of career advancement. As she stated, "Twitter I think has changed everything…its revolutionary, it's [a] really important [tool as a writer]." While Tremel used a Discord server to connect with other emerging writers in the gaming industry, as well as a few podcasts focused upon gaming journalism, Twitter remained his most important tool in terms of information access.

Tremel: *It's all Twitter, like straight up... I see stuff from Twitter that I'll hop on to, like a podcast, or someone's smaller publication that they're doing stuff with, but you find out about that stuff from Twitter.*

These responses indicate that black freelancers should approach digital technologies and social media sites such as Twitter as networking tools, as they are effective in developing and expanding professional networks, identifying job opportunities and accruing important social resources.

Chapter 6: Report Conclusion: "There's no Guidebook for This"

Angela: *I don't think the journalism classes teach [professionalization skills in digital media] at all...a lot of people just write for the school paper and that's that kind of journalism they're being taught….[My school,] they're not interested in that, which is really sad.*

"Freelancing in America," a 2017 study commissioned in a partnership between trade association The Freelancers Union and freelancing platform Upwork, asserts that within a decade, the majority of the United States' workforce will consist of freelancers, with 50 percent of adults born between 1981 and 1996 already engaging in some form of freelance labor (Upwork, 2017). "Freelancing in America" presents a rosy portrait of freelancing, portraying freelancers as willingly entrepreneurial beings who are "better prepared for the future" and seek to "take control of their destiny" via freelancing (.ibid).

While this sunny image of the enterprising freelancer going bravely into the new world of work is quite attractive, freelance writer's personal accounts of their working lives paints a starkly different picture. Low pay, late payments, and a burning desire for steady employment proliferate (Johnson, 2019; Silverman, 2019). While all freelancers are disadvantaged by the ubiquity of flexible work, black freelancers are particularly disadvantaged, as they often lack the social capital and personal connections that facilitate white workers' access and entry into job opportunities (DiTomaso, 2013; Rivera, 2015).

This report has identified ways in which black freelancers use social network and digital technologies to find job opportunities, develop social resources and build professional connections. While many freelancers report taking pleasure in their use of

digital technologies, effectively utilizing them requires time, effort, and a process of trial and error. Bryan Caplan has argued that many of the essential skills required to succeed in the modern workforce are not taught in higher education programs, an assertion corroborated by investigations into university textbooks aimed at young writers, which contain passing reference to digital technologies such as Twitter but make no reference to their importance in terms of building professional connections and social capital (Caplan, 2017; Reimold, 2013; Bradshaw, 2018). My interviews with black freelancers strengthened this finding; all three respondents were pursuing or had obtained undergraduate degrees but stated that university curriculum neglected to impart the essential skills needed to succeed in digital media, such as rate setting, pitching, and use of backend applications such as WordPress. Black students pursuing careers in writing or journalism are especially disadvantaged by these deficits in curriculum, as they are less likely to receive jobs in the industry upon graduation and are the first to lose their jobs in layoffs, which may necessitate many to work as freelancers (Barthel, 2015; Kalev, 2016).

While the rising tide of unionization in digital media organizations and the increasing popularity of socialist politics in the United States indicates that the future of digital media labor may become more secure in the coming years, educational programs, digital media organizations, and established writers cannot sit idly by and wait for change (Weiss, 2017; Gallup, 2018). If freelancing is truly the future of work, stakeholders must do more to prepare young writers for its realities.

Colleges, universities and high schools that purport to prepare young writers for professional careers should create or expand curriculum focused upon entrepreneurial use

of social networking sites, emphasizing that social networking sites can be used to both access crucial information on the publishing industry and build professional networks. Hosting workshops and guest speakers who have extensive freelance experience in digital media work would allow students to develop practical strategies focused upon pitching, rate-setting, and strategic use of social networks. Historically Black Colleges and Universities should draw upon their alumni network in acquiring guest speakers and workshop facilitators, a strategy that would counter the lack of visible black freelancers established in extant literature (Seldon, 2017).

Recommendations

Digital media organizations seeking to promote equity in digital publishing should take steps to implement fair and timely writer compensation, as well as re-examine the composition of their editorial staff, which continues to consist largely of white males (NABJ, 2014). Fairly compensating freelancers in a timely manner is mutually beneficial for both online outlets and writers. EBONY magazine's nonpayment has become something of a punchline amongst black freelancers active on Twitter; distrust in the outlet likely limits the volume and quality of work submitted to the site, which further damages the publication's reputation (Johnson, 2019). Who Pays Writers? and similar resources allow freelancers to communicate positive experiences with online outlets, which likely bolsters their status amongst freelancers, leading to an influx of quality work (Who Pays Writers, 2019). The dissatisfaction many black writers have with digital media outlets focuses upon their lack of culturally competent editorial and management staff, which often leads to stifling edits, the promotion of sub-par, exploitative work, and

the production of awkward calls for black writers during times of convenience. Making a concerted effort to hire and retain black editorial and management staff would be of mutual benefit to both writers and digital media organizations, as having staff with the cultural competency to acquire and edit compelling work would likely increase both readership and writer satisfaction, leading to a rise in compelling pitches and submissions. While holding professional development trainings focused upon implicit bias, or "unconscious prejudice in favor of or against certain groups," may be somewhat effectual in altering the stifling editorial practices of culturally incompetent editors, studies show that the effectiveness of such trainings decrease after a few hours to several days (Sarine, 2012; Lai et al., 2016). "Calling on influential individuals [within] institutions to change norms and addressing structural issues within…organization[s]" holds more promise in terms of bringing about organizational change, indicating that CEOs and managing editors of digital media sites should hold summits or workshops with experienced writers of color to discuss concrete changes that can be made to their organizational structures (Goldhill, 2019; Tankard and Paluck, 2016).

Established black freelance writers looking to facilitate developing writers' entry into the industry could create a Twitter page focused upon the realities of digital media work, one that goes beyond the transmission of pitch opportunities and dispenses practical advice, inside information, and generates expensive conversations regarding freelancing for digital media sites. Reddit's "Ask Me Anything" series allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to answer questions related to their professional and personal lives. A similar series hosted on Twitter by established black freelancers would give

novices the opportunity to ask direct questions focused upon navigating the digital publishing industry, which would allow them to develop practical skills and strategies.

While implementing the above strategies would lead to a more sustainable digital media ecosystem for all writers, they would be particularly beneficial to black freelancers who experience distinct difficulties (Seldon, 2017; Nickolaisen 2016; Barthel, 2015; Kalev, 2016; Newkirk, 2000). We must do more than encourage black writers to "take control of their destiny" via freelancing, making a concerted effort to provide young writers with the skills and strategies to do so (Upwork, 2017).

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